

Steve F. Anderson

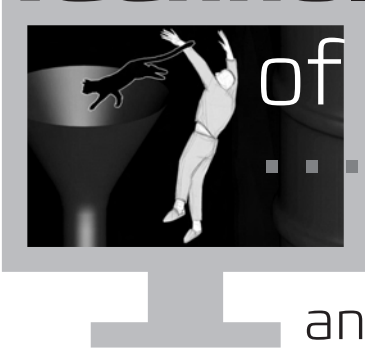
Technologies of History

Visual Media
and the
Eccentricity
of the Past



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and the Eccentricity
of the Past

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Acknowledgments

This is a lungfish of a book. It was born in the great oceans of celluloid, Mylar, and broadcast media of the previous century but adapted itself to life ashore on the vast beaches of computational media, games, and networks; this evolution, with its richness as well as eccentricities, has infused this book at every level.

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This book is dedicated to the memory of Chick Strand, Anne Friedberg, and Kenneth Forbes Anderson, the colleagues, mentors, and family members I have lost in the time it has taken to complete this book, and the one I have gained, Ginger Miranda Anderson-Willis.

It is beyond my ability to acknowledge the extraordinary insights, words, patience, and generosity that Holly Willis has brought to this project. If not for her, this book—and I along with it—would still be gasping for air in a primordial soup.

Introduction

The look of the past can be retrieved, preserved and disseminated in an unprecedented fashion. But awareness of history as an interpretation of the past succumbs to a faith in history as representation. The viewer is confronted not by historical writing, but by the appearance of history itself.
—Allan Sekula¹

Each generation of media technology brings with it the potential to reimagine our relationship to the past. Conventional wisdom holds that visual histories are most effective at bringing the past “to life,” inviting audiences to reexperience events and encounter historical figures as living people. But this rather limited view obscures far broader and more interesting questions about our most basic relationship to history and the diverse contributions of visual and computational media to conceptions of the past. History is now up for grabs in ways that were hitherto unimaginable; the past is routinely being remixed, reimagined, re-scripted, and reappropriated in powerful and eccentric ways, often by individuals—fans, geeks, hackers, teens, and artists—who do not necessarily see themselves as engaged in the discourse of history at all. Tempting as it is to view this as a threat to both the order and discipline of history, we may equally see it as a sign of healthy, dynamically contested relations to the past. While historical uncertainty and disputation are sometimes viewed as the enemy of a respectful attitude toward the lived past, consensual histories run an even greater risk of becoming polite fables, the kind of cultural narratives that lead to rituals of remembrance rather than critical thinking and political agency. Media histories are all too easily misapprehended as tools for building passive consensus and foreclosing debate. This is due in no small part to the long shadow cast by Hollywood historical epics, documentary miniseries, and vast digital archives that offer grand visions and narrative closure rather than stubborn resistance, delinquency, and conflict.

But this is not the way it has to be. This book seeks out the cracks and fissures in historical consensus—those neglected, indigestible, contrarian imaginings that throw our whole historical sensibility into sharp

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relief. Emerging from an increasingly varied media sphere that includes film, television, games, and a whole spectrum of networked and computational media, these widely varied practices of history all see the past as a function of consequential, and above all *mutable*, materials: images, sounds, and architectures of information that are *both* expressive representation and tools for thinking and knowing. Simply put, we should not look to media for the truth about the past but instead examine them for clues about the way history is constructed and engaged through cultural products, memories, myths, and politics. The goal of this book is to move beyond the epistemological binaries that have dominated discourses of media and history during the past four decades to instead consider the myriad “technologies of history,” the ways in which media practices broadly conceived help us think about the world, the past, and our potential to act as historical and political agents.

It is difficult to talk about what is at stake in the construction and dissemination of history through media without resorting to vague concepts such as “historical consciousness” or “historical awareness.” We may assume that historical consciousness of a much re-created and increasingly distant event such as World War II, for example, is shaped significantly by the war stories repeated continuously in TV shows, movies, and games. But while the combination of anecdotal evidence and intuition supporting this assumption is convincing enough for certain kinds of observations, the actual relationship between these media and what people really know and care about the past should not be taken for granted. Although this book explores how viewers respond to film, video, and digital texts, its focus remains on the production and dissemination of cultural discourse rather than the more ethereal sphere of cultural consciousness. In order to avoid facile assumptions about reception, I will strive, whenever possible, to ground my analysis of media texts and systems in a clearly defined set of historiographical concerns or discursive systems.

I will also argue for a rigorously parsed understanding of an equally slippery term: memory. Terms such as “social memory” and “popular memory” are often used to describe what is at stake in a society’s struggles over the construction of history, though efforts to define them precisely are rare. The working presumption for many writers is that the processes of remembering and forgetting that happen in people’s heads on an individual scale are analogous to the way memory operates on whole populations.² In recent years, cultural theorists have argued for more complex and reciprocal models of interaction among the realms of memory, history, and media. Although it is easy to speak of film or television as creating or

erasing something tangible called memory, I find it vastly more productive to accept the challenge posed by Marita Sturken, who describes relationships of “entanglement” that take account of the multiple narratives of history and memory as elements of a rich and complex morass of cultural practice.³ Therefore, following Sturken, my preferred term to describe the functioning of memory across social groups and their behaviors will be “cultural memory.”

It is also in the realm of practice—what Michel de Certeau calls “making history”—that we see the difference between “historiography” and its loosely deployed other, “history.” The task of the historian, according to de Certeau, is a “repoliticization” of historical discourse, that is, a kind of writing that historicizes historiography itself. Historians, he argues, should apply their historicizing methods (i.e., a reading of socioeconomic and mental conditions) to their own work in order to show “how a symbolic system articulates itself in a political one.”⁴ On political grounds I will argue that all *history* is really *historiography*; that the separation of the object from its process of production obfuscates the ideological dimensions implicit in any treatment of the past. Thus, for the sake of clarity in the pages that follow, “historiography” and its derivatives will be the preferred terms for any form of discursive construction concerned with events of the past. The term “history” will be used sparingly as a synonym for “the past,” for example, when part of a vernacular phrase such as “history film” or “the construction of history.” When the goal is to highlight the contested nature of “history” as a cultural formation, the term will appear—with no disrespect intended—in quotation marks.

Finally, in order to highlight the complicated effects of mediation on the relationship between images and the world—particularly the world of the past—I will attempt whenever possible to emphasize the constructive, rather than mimetic, aspects of film, video, and digital images. Roland Barthes argued that the indexicality of photographic images depends upon a visual referent, attesting to the fact that “something happened here.” But even for Barthes, the content of a photograph was only complete when combined with memories expressed through spoken or written words.⁵ In the digital era, this assertion must be further qualified, but the ontological status of photographic images has rarely spoken for itself, whether in the courts or among theorists of visual culture. Barthes’s need to assert the indexical nature of photography demonstrates its contingent status long before the advent of digital manipulation. Henceforth, in order to underscore this contingency with regard to media-based histories, we will

speak exclusively of the “construction,” rather than the “representation,” of history.

Mediated History

In our present age of technological proliferation, it often seems that what we call “history” flows more or less automatically from film, television, and computer screens, a by-product of the informational hemorrhaging of corporate-dominated media industries. Indeed, historiography depends on media for both raw materials and a means of conveying ideas from one moment or generation to the next. But the precise nature of the relationship between historiography and its medium is far from transparent. Within the American culture industry, “history” often functions primarily as a commodity to be packaged, sold, and consumed. Like all commodities, it may therefore be used and reused, mutated, revised, or recontextualized. While certain genres of all-inclusive, medium-effacing historiography attempt to conceal their origins through prodigious use of images from the past, others continually assert their status as ideologically invested artifacts that are invented, thought, made, and constructed. This book is concerned not with large-scale historical documentaries or costumed epics—“feather films” (as *New York Times*’ Vincent Canby once described them), in which the main character writes with a large quill pen—but rather with instances of aberration, self-consciousness, and eccentricity. My focus will be on media that recognize that the construction of history is a complicated and sometimes ugly business.

Cinema, television, and digital media do not merely serve as vehicles for historical discourse; they also shape our basic relations to time, history, and memory.⁶ It is arguably no more natural to conceive of “future” and “past” as entities successive and distinct from each other than to view cinema’s succession of minutely varied images projected in rapid succession as representative of life. Film, indeed, includes the capacity to disrupt the evenly measured flow of time that we, at least since the modern era, believe ourselves to experience. Likewise, films that digress from established timelines and narratives open up possibilities for more diverse and controversial conceptions of the past. The potential for non-linear or multiply linear temporal structures is, of course, exponentially greater in the realm of digital media, games, and computational systems. However, the extent to which the majority of these media have explored this potential remains disappointing with regard to the construction of history.

In order to adequately address the role of visual media in historiography, we will first address some theoretical contexts of motion pictures. Film theorists have argued that cinematic reception is partially defined through the perceptual apparatus of the brain and the unconscious. Cinematic devices such as flashback, flash-forward, slow motion, freeze frame, and so forth, suggest cognitive correlates produced through the imperfect activities of the brain's synaptic functions. I would add that the proliferation of historical images on film and television has led to the emergence of an equally intimate and reciprocal relationship between historical viewing and historical thinking. The language of cinema, like the languages of history, must be learned. Films instruct their audiences how they are to be watched, giving rise to reading protocols that vary from film to film and genre to genre. As such, films may also work against established communicative norms, subverting existing systems or offering alternatives of their own. Taking this one step further, the reading protocols from cinema allow us to "read history" in ways that may deviate from how the past is conventionally understood. Similarly, the widely varied reception contexts and interactive potential in television and video games exponentially complicate assumptions about how meaning is produced.

If we acknowledge that motion pictures have become an important part of the way "history" is disseminated and remembered, it follows that an understanding of the way viewers receive it should be factored into our understandings of cultural memory. Simply stated, historians should be more attentive to reception issues, especially when dealing with visual or popular cultural historiographies. A key aspect of this reception process is bound up with the processes and practices of memory as well as intertextual relations to other media. It is thus necessary to address questions of spectatorship, subject positioning, and the various ideologies embedded in the languages of film, television, and digital media such as games and online networks. These histories, then, are not limited to the media texts themselves, but they also bring with them all the problems of signification, subjectivity, and politics that have been articulated by media history and theory throughout much of the previous century.

Attention to these theoretical complications is sometimes elided within the subdiscipline of film and history, where realism, with its illusionist simulation of real-world experiences and emotions, remains the privileged mode of discourse. Films are praised for historical fidelity and accuracy of detail or denounced for anachronies and departures from the factual record. Long before historians began appearing on the History Channel to elucidate Hollywood's shortcomings, distinctions between mere historical

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“costumery”⁷ and academic-style historiography were crucial to the formation of uppercase “History” as a proper academic discipline. Indeed, in Western universities, the discipline of “History” was not fully articulated until the early nineteenth century, concurrent with (and in opposition to) the rise of the historical novel. As numerous literary theorists have pointed out, the distinction is, to some degree, arbitrary. The basic relationship between “literary” (i.e., fictional) history and factual historiography is one of interdetermination rather than opposition.⁸

Western traditions of historiography have emerged from a combination of myth, fact, and imagination expressed through the revision and layering of textual systems. Contemporary struggles over the role of media in the construction of history restage many of the dilemmas that have been articulated and debated in the philosophy of history since the Enlightenment. Many of these arguments proceed from questions of whether historiography is best understood as a science or an art, or adequately described as a recapitulation of prevailing power relations reflected backward through time. Writings in the philosophy of history have situated historical discourse in terms of the philosophical and literary movements, political exigencies, and epistemological frameworks available to a given age. In other words, philosophical discourse attempts to historicize “history,” to render it a congruous and integral part of our understanding of the world. At present, coherent understandings (those infamous “master narratives”) of the world and of the past have rightly come under suspicion. Yet, the production and revision of historical discourse continues, in spite of the difficulty and apparent redundancy of the central questions of epistemology. Does their lack of resolution mean that these questions are “eternal” or simply no longer interesting to ask?

Visual History in Context

Why has interest in visual history increased in recent years? The answer is due in part to the emergence in the late 1980s of visual culture as a field,⁹ and the ensuing interest in all things visual. The answer is also partly institutional. During the past two decades, it has become increasingly clear that film and its Mylar surrogates would continue to play a key role in historical writing and thinking well into the digital age. As a result, film has become widely integrated into the curricula of college and university history departments. In part, this responds to more general trends within academia toward interdisciplinarity and the need for differentiation among graduate students entering an increasingly competi-

tive job market. The subdiscipline of “film and history” has also carved a small but persistent niche market within academic publishing. During the 1980s, film became a regular component of mainstream historical journals such as the *American Historical Review*, while seminal works by Pierre Sorlin (*The Film in History*, 1980) and Marc Ferro (*Cinema and History*, 1988) were first published in English. The specialty journal *Film and History* was founded in 1971, followed by the formation of the International Association of Media and History in 1981 and online manifestations such as the electronic journal *Screening the Past* (1997) and many others.

The past two decades have also brought a proliferation of book-length publications on the relationship between film and history.¹⁰ However, much of this work emerges from deep within the disciplinary and methodological boundaries of academic history, with relatively little engagement with the theoretical approaches developed by film, television, and visual studies since the 1970s. With some notable exceptions, historians have tended to deal with films as if they were in competition with traditional forms of academic writing. Certain works may be acclaimed for providing a sense of realistic experience or visual richness, but most often film is seen as a deeply flawed medium for historical reconstruction, with a low density of information and unfortunate tendencies to privilege narrative and character over fact. Even Robert Rosenstone, whose work redefined the discourse of film and history in the 1990s, stops short of dealing directly with cultural memory and questions of reception.

The growing interest in the construction of history on media also responds to a variety of less tangible social needs and circumstances. In his influential critiques of postmodernism, Fredric Jameson diagnosed the United States of the 1980s as a society that can no longer think critically about “the great metaphysical preoccupations, the fundamental questions of being and of the meaning of life.”¹¹ He argued that the generalized state of amnesia afflicting American culture has eradicated not our desire for “history” but only our ability to understand and engage it in meaningful ways.¹² For Jameson, postmodernism’s random cannibalization of images and styles from the past is symptomatic of the trivialized role of “history” in contemporary culture. The frustrated desire for “real history,” which is sublimated into endless varieties of kitsch in architecture, design, and fashion, may also account for the continuing popularity of such nostalgic and fantastic histories as *Star Trek* (1966–69) and *Forrest Gump* (1994). If this diagnosis is correct (a question explored in some detail in the chapters that follow), historians and cultural critics must choose between ignoring some of the primary ways that Americans engage the past and the



The Smoking Man, William B. Davis, contemplates his life as an assassin for the U.S. government in the *X-Files*' "Musings of a Cigarette Smoking Man." (Fox/News Corp., 1996)

unsavory task of addressing the contents and strategies of historiography as it is actually being practiced on film, TV, and digital media.

The increased interest in the construction of history since the 1970s in the United States also responds to a desire to regain control of historiography after Vietnam and the crises of governmental credibility that followed in the wake of the Warren Commission report and Watergate.¹³ Subsequently, revelations of the disastrous legacy of Reagan's Cold War politics and supply-side economics, combined with the complicity of the news media in disinformation campaigns during the Panama invasion and the first Gulf War, provide a framework for the emergence of TV shows that center on conspiracy and paranoia, such as *The X-Files* (1993–2002), *Millennium* (1996–99), and *Dark Skies* (1996–97), as well as movies such as Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991).¹⁴ More recently, amid revelations about the violation of basic rights in conjunction with the "war on terror"—from Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo to eroding privacy rights within the U.S.—it increasingly seems that we are living through the inculcation of what

Giorgio Agamben calls the military and economic “state of emergency,” in which fundamental rights are held in abeyance. These increasingly normalized “exceptional circumstances” are generally blamed on the terror attacks in Washington and New York by Osama bin Laden’s al Qaeda network in 2001,¹⁵ and have clearly set the stage for a spate of video games such as *Waco Resurrection* (2003), *Kuma\War* (2003), and *JFK Reloaded* (2004), in which players renegotiate their relationship to “history” via playable environments. As I will argue in subsequent chapters, a symptomatic reading of the relationship between such real-world events and their repetitions and metaphors in popular media offers a significant but ultimately insufficient strategy for historiographical interpretation.

The End of History and the Bounds of the Expressible

During the late 1980s and early '90s, it became fashionable for theorists from opposing ends of the ideological spectrum—as exemplified by French philosopher Jean Baudrillard and American political scientist Francis Fukuyama—to conclude that “history” itself was at an end. The extremes of postmodern culture, for both Fukuyama and Baudrillard, resulted in the loss, rather than the reconfiguration, of history. Baudrillard argued that this loss was due to the triumph of simulation over representation; the obviation of the category of the referent set any attempt at historical construction adrift in a sea of ungrounded signification. Baudrillard’s assertion that “the [first] Gulf War did not take place,” for example, arose from observations about its primary manifestation in the West as a media spectacle.¹⁶ Baudrillard’s admission that the events of the Gulf War (bombing raids, death, destruction, etc.) *did*, of course, take place reveals that, for him, it is not the denial of history at stake but rather a fundamental challenge to how it is constructed, disseminated, and assigned cultural value. For Fukuyama, it was the ultimate rationalization of historical “progress” that put an end to the struggles that previously defined teleological historiography. Although Fukuyama’s “end of history” argument is rooted in specific economic and geopolitical changes of the late twentieth century—namely, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the “worldwide triumph of democracy” and “free market” economics,¹⁷ the thinking it represents is often uncritically applied to the role of film (and especially television) in the construction of history. Fukuyama’s book *The End of History and the Last Man* touted the emergence of a “remarkable consensus” in favor of liberal principles of government and capitalist economics,¹⁸ and declared California to be “the most post-historical part

of the U.S.”¹⁹ Although Fukuyama does not address history films or TV directly, such assertions would be incomprehensible if not for the omnipresence of the film and television industries in Los Angeles. Hollywood, once synonymous with the production and destruction of dreams, now more commonly signifies the erasure or commercialization of history.²⁰

Cultural theories that describe contemporary historical consciousness in terms of debasement and loss mendaciously imply that there was once a time when historical thinking was more firmly grounded in secure access to an authentic past, when past and present spoke to each other more directly.²¹ But historical consciousness, like historiography itself, does not move forward through “homogenous, empty time,” as Walter Benjamin put it.²² Part of the difficulty—but also the intricacy and fascination—of dealing with texts from the past lies precisely in negotiating the gaps between the time of their origin and the present. We view the past through accumulated layers of historical sedimentation²³ and desires that underscore the fact of our own immersion in a concrete historical moment. The past, which David Lowenthal fittingly describes as a “foreign country,” is no less complex or contradictory than the present. We should be suspicious of any theory of history that presupposes a past that was more naive than our own time. This is not to say that codes of historiography have remained consistent over time. Moments of rupture and realignment occur when historical construction and thinking are directly affected by the events of the past. As Hayden White argues, a “modernist event” such as the Holocaust is so dramatically disruptive of ordinary historical progression as to be “unrepresentable.”²⁴ However, we must ask whether the challenge posed by the Holocaust and a handful of other historical events might be more productively addressed as a problem of epistemology rather than representation.²⁵

In the case of Claude Lanzmann’s nine-hour documentary miniseries *Shoah* (1985), for example, the goal is neither re-creation nor documentation of the Holocaust. Lanzmann’s decision to eschew all archival imagery of the Holocaust represents a historiographical gesture of the rhetorical limits of photographic evidence. Instead, Lanzmann invites meditation on the circumstances and causes of this event and its implications for all humanity in the present as well as the past. *Shoah* exemplifies a model of historiography that is conceived as a process rather than a series of static, if reusable, documents. Lanzmann’s historiographical approach arguably speaks to not the “unrepresentability” of its object but rather the potential of a film to approach what Noam Chomsky has termed the “bounds of the

expressible,” that is, those ideas constrained by an ideological or political order rather than the capacity of the medium itself. Rather than defying representation, the modernist event could be equally seen as challenging the fundamental means by which the past is constructed and imagined. Therefore, the net result is not a failure of representation but rather a call for renegotiation of the terms of the historiographical debate.

In this context, the challenge posed to historiography and epistemology by the “modernist event” may be taken as catalytic rather than catastrophic. The investigations of historical trauma and memory by Marcel Ophüls are exemplary of the potential for film to address even the most disruptive historical events without succumbing to historical exceptionalism. At this point, I want to make it clear that my emphasis on textuality in the construction of history does not mean relinquishing the ability to talk about certain functional and material conceptions of the past. The charge that poststructural theory diminishes history to mere relativism—“the product of competing narrative views with nothing to adjudicate between them”²⁶—indicates a misunderstanding of the stakes of historical discourse. The competing textual systems through which we necessarily construct and gain access to ideas about the past need not be regarded as necessitating descent into indeterminacy. As Robert Young argues, “The reproach that poststructuralism has neglected history really consists of the complaint that it has questioned History.”²⁷ Awareness of the operation of textual systems—together with their embeddedness in a matrix of institutional, cultural, and political power—is a perfectly good place to start thinking about the most vexing problems of media and history.

In practice, what I am suggesting aligns with Tony Bennett’s assertion that meaningful historical debate can only take place between the horizons of determinacy and indeterminacy and therefore relies on “conditions of intelligibility” that are “grounded in a material conception of history.”²⁸ The problem, of course, is that Bennett’s material conception of history is not always so easily obtained—least of all without deploying some sort of textual system. Simply put, this book privileges textual conceptions of historiography with the knowledge that material consequences are at stake. I view this apparent contradiction as irreducible to a simple textual-material dichotomy and hope that the tension created by their intersection raises questions that are only resolvable through political action. The “conditions of intelligibility” to which Bennett alludes are a functional part of “meaningful historical debate” precisely, but only, to the extent they may be mobilized toward social and political praxis.

Historiography, Truth, and Narrative

If we consider the basic condition of historiography to be an ongoing process of discursive and cultural struggle, then we must look for meaning beyond the “footnotes, bibliography, and other scholarly apparatus”²⁹ of professional historians to the way historical evidence is culturally processed, disseminated, and remembered. To the extent that photographic reproduction bears an indexical relation to the world, photographs and film images may indeed capture a photochemical rendering of physical surfaces from the past. Fiction films that were shot in past decades, for example, reveal something about the time in which they were made, if only pertaining to set construction, costuming, acting, or lighting design. Location shots offer incidental evidence of the appearance of city streets or landscapes, the kinds of fashion that may have been prevalent, or the price of gasoline.³⁰ As Carlo Ginzberg argues, we understand the past by discovering and interpreting a series of often unintentional clues and cultural myths.³¹ It is thus possible to extract evidence of social concerns and assumptions through analysis of recurring themes and narrative structures. Whether a film is of or from a previous era, it renders the past dialogically, through processes of negotiation and interpretation within which viewers can and should be construed as active participants. This layering of cinematic signification and interpretation bears an analogous relation to constructing and understanding “history.”

To the extent that visual media operate mimetically to show us the world as it once was, these media also support the tendency to understand historiography as a way of reexperiencing or re-creating the past. This is as true of an entirely fictional story like *The Godfather* (1972) as a famed historical epic such as Abel Ganz’s *Napoleon* (1927). In recent decades, historians and scholars have exhaustively debated the relative significance of these two historical modes.³² Although some conflicts persist, it is now equally possible to discuss both fictional and fact-based histories in terms of their construction of the past. In both cases, films are evaluated in terms of not only their accuracy and faithfulness to the historical record but also their ability to capture and evoke something called the “spirit” of the past.³³ But, as decades of film scholarship have shown, motion pictures achieve emotional and psychological identification through codes and conventions, not by nature. Cinema and television contain within their representational apparatuses the simultaneous and inescapable marks of their own artifice, even in the most “realistic” historical epic. This allows for perhaps the most convincing reevaluation of the basic process of his-

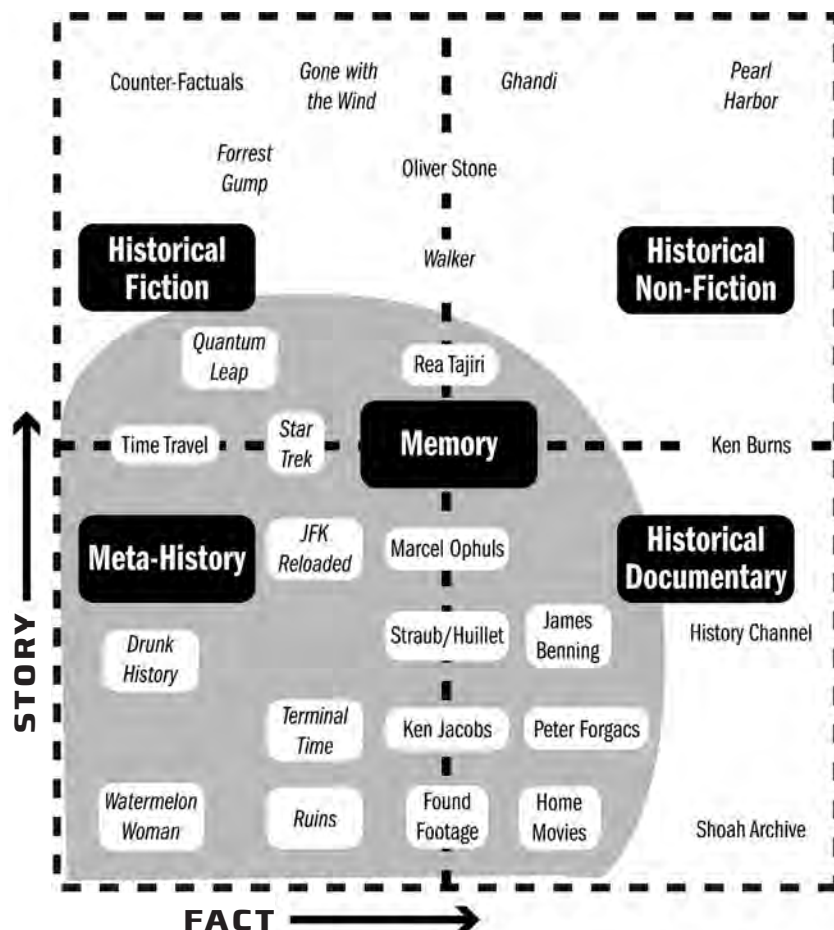
torical construction. Films that deploy historical conventions in order to subvert them reveal not only cinema's representational apparatus but also some of the assumptions that accompany historical thinking. The work of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet—who are known for paying precise attention to historical detail while obstinately refusing to suture viewers into a naturalistic diegesis—is exemplary of this potential.

Among mainstream history films, the well-researched and documented case study remains the dominant paradigm. In recent years, the ancillary markets for history films have come to include books that detail the historical research upon which a film's story is based. In part, this reinforces the received wisdom that visual historiography is dependent upon written texts for its origin or justification or both.³⁴ Although not considered at any length in this book, there is much to be learned from the socio-political and ideological investments of "realistic" history films. In most cases, however, I have deliberately elided these films, which are treated extensively elsewhere, in order to focus on works that eschew or subvert conventions of historical accuracy and realism.³⁵

Historiography Modes

If we map the practices of visual historiography along the axes of attention to factual accuracy and emphasis on narrative, we may visualize this book's areas of focus and exclusion in relation to prior academic work in visual history. Although such tools for visualization are problematic because they are necessarily reductive, the following diagram may help clarify this book's discussions of less well-known works of visual historiography. For the purposes of this visualization, I have selected certain exemplars and limit cases that illustrate the logic behind this mapping. These categories are not in themselves any way static or deterministic, nor is my placement of any given work within a single category without nuance or exception. Indeed, the most provocative examples are those that refuse neat categorization or that call for extending the limits of a category—hence the extraordinarily vibrant and contentious public discourse surrounding Stone's controversial historical revisionism, for example, or the fascination among historians with counterfactuals that fall far outside of their ordinary purview on the right half of the figure.

The area mapped in grey surrounds a zone of practice that privileges neither narrative nor factuality in its treatment of historical subject matter. I have labeled this general area "metahistory" for its reflection upon the act of writing history as much as the actual historical events, personages,



or interpretations represented. In contrast with White's use of the term "metahistory," however, I am satisfied to deploy the concept of reflective histories for categorizing alone. The works constellated in proximity to this term do not share any particular historiographical characteristics, and I will elucidate the widely varying ways in which these works contribute to my overarching argument. Finally, although it may result in consternation for some readers, I have taken the liberty of labeling the central zone of this figure "memory"—though I do not intend this to propose a consensual understanding of the term. For me, this multiply liminal space acknowledges the multivalent nature of memory and argues implicitly that we may best understand it through the conjunction and

contradictions of fact, fiction, the desire for story, and resistance to unified narrative. My hope is that spatially locating some of the texts that are central to this discussion will clarify the focus of this book in comparison with its predecessors.

Discourses of Eccentricity

My goal is not to articulate a fixed relationship between historiography and various forms of media but rather to focus on certain, concentrated moments of interaction in which they—sometimes inadvertently—give each other away. The pages that follow do not attempt to construct a coherent narrative or to reconcile the multiple theoretical approaches developed in each chapter. Instead, the book as a whole addresses a set of historiographical problems raised with particular eloquence by group media texts that are connected by an uneasy relation to the construction of history. Each chapter intervenes in some aspect of ongoing debates over film, history, memory, or digital culture, most often to address the presuppositions and omissions of previous scholarship or to draw attention to the historiographical significance of neglected works. In all cases, my focus is on moments that cause us to reflect on the mechanics or the epistemological dilemmas of history writing itself—a metahistory of media histories if you will. Although much of the work considered here is admittedly obscure, exclusion from commercial distribution networks should not result in diminished critical attention. As David James has argued, the industrial and critical invisibility of alternative cinema “is the mark of its threat and also of its importance.”³⁶

To put it bluntly, I believe most visual histories have asked too little of their audiences, presumed too little knowledge and sophistication, and revealed too little about their processes of construction. Most Hollywood films construct their audiences primarily as consumers—both in the obvious economic sense and also ideologically—as vehicles for activating predetermined emotional responses. As consumers of commercial media, we are most often positioned as spectators rather than producers, critics, or agents of history.³⁷ Nonetheless, the histories produced by mainstream cinema and television are not without idiosyncrasy and moments of transgression. With existing boundaries of “legitimate” historical construction in a constant state of flux, the production and reception of historical discourse must be considered across as broad a range of cultural texts as possible. In some cases, this may involve making connections among widely divergent products of popular culture and the avant-garde. Although this

strategy makes for alarming juxtapositions, the benefits of these discursive disjunctions far outweigh the detriments to scholarly convention. In any case, the traditional separation of high and low culture has always been of dubious merit. Virtually since the term's inception, the avant-garde has been demarcated against the realm of popular culture while harboring a not-so-secret fascination with it. By juxtaposing a disparate array of cultural texts I mean to erode the high/low and margin/center relations of commercial and experimental media, shifting emphasis toward works that challenge the discursive conventions of historiography or the cultural negotiation of the past.

The idea that meaningful generalizations about "history" and its telling may be made across such far-flung fields of media practice is both misleading and inconsistent with the type of historiography this book seeks to deploy. Inspired by Michel Foucault, the title of the book aims to focus attention on the mechanisms of history that are made visible through constant revision, contestation, and disruption. The *technologies of history* that interest us are those that are made to be broken, hacked, or reengineered. It is not a grand theory of history that we seek, nor even a stable relationship between the past and the media through which we engage it. If we are to speak meaningfully about the heterogeneity of the past, our method must be likewise heterogeneous. The goal here is not to reform narrative cinema's historical epics or to denounce the narrowness of concern in evidence on the History Channel and the reductive determinism of simulation games. Those who care about the construction and dissemination of "history" on film, television, and digital media should begin by articulating strategies of counterreading for the various histories that emerge across a range of commercial and noncommercial cultural practices. And perhaps most importantly, we must cultivate an awareness of too easily marginalized media practices, whether they are part of a self-consciously artistic avant-garde, informal networks of amateur creators, alternate history gamers, or pop-culture remixers.